

Murder Will Out? Oscar Wilde's 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' (1887) and the Sensational Decree of Destiny

Laurence Talairach-Vielmas

It is no wonder that Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) or Michael Cox's sequel to *The Meaning of Night*, *The Glass of Time* (2008) are so popular today. Like numerous other neo-Victorian novels, they rewrite the conventions of the Victorian sensation novel, using secrets, mysteries and mistaken identities to thrill the readers with tightly plotted crimes. Launched by the serialization of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* in *All the Year Round* in 1859–60, Victorian sensation fiction aimed to horrify readers by scraping the opaque surface of every day reality and foregrounding the deceptiveness of appearances. When sensational journalism was thriving, printing daily cases of atrocious murders or adulteries, the sensation novelists used 'such mysteries that every now and then fill the newspapers,' as E.S. Dallas puts it, turning traditional eighteenth-century Gothic plots into modern Victorian criminal intrigues.¹ Yet, the sensational narratives did not simply offer stories of poor victimized heroines murdered by their suitors. Appearing at the height of the trend towards realism, sensation novels upset literary expectations with modern criminal plots which featured improper heroines²—scheming and ambitious women concealed beneath the seamless appearance of domestic angels. Thus, adulterous or bigamous heroines, murderesses well-bred in the art of masquerading or drug-dosing held the main parts—radically transforming the feminine ideal as sensation novelists played with the codes of representation and the stereotypes of the time.

Revealingly, like its literary forefather, the Gothic novel, the sensation novel was so popular that many rewritings, parodies and pastiches appeared in the following decades. Oscar Wilde's 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' (1887) is a case in point. The short story humorously revisits the conventions of the genre. Not only does the main protagonist plot several murders and gets away with the crime, but the short story teems as well with motifs which peppered sensation novels: the characters read French novels, like Robert Audley, the amateur detective in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–62), or find their sources of inspiration in treatises of toxicology ('the *Pharmacopoeia* and...Erskine's *Toxicology*'), like Geoffrey Delamayn, the villain of Wilkie Collins's *Man and Wife* (1870), recalling as well several sensational female characters inspired by the case of Madeleine Smith, accused of poisoning her lover with arsenic in 1857, as in Collins's 'The Poisoned Meal' (1858), *Armada* (1864) and *The Law and the Lady* (1875). Further, as in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–3) (a novel which is sometimes believed to have launched the sensation genre) and in Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), which star two professional inspectors, Inspector Bucket and Sergeant Cuff, Scotland Yard detectives appear—if only to disappear—and Wilde's short story as a whole foregrounds the anonymity of city life, people's deceptive appearances, and Londoners' unstrung nerves, leading to melodramatic excesses, such as cries of despair or characters 'flinging' themselves on sofas.

As Lady Windermere underlines, identity is unstable—appearances never match reality, and conspirators would be too cold should they have to wear their coats of mail:

People are so annoying. All my pianists look exactly like poets, and all my poets look exactly like pianists; and I remember last season asking a most dreadful conspirator to dinner, a man who had blown up ever so many people, and always wore a coat of mail, and carried a dagger up his shirt-sleeve; and do you know that when he came he looked just like a nice old clergyman, and cracked jokes all the evening? Of course, he was very amusing, and all that, but I was awfully disappointed; and when I asked him about the coat of mail, he only laughed, and said it was far too cold to wear in England.

In fact, Wilde's pastiche lays bare the way in which the sensation novel played upon codes which hardly varied from one best-seller to another, as suggested by the critic Henry Mansel in a review of sensation novels published in 1863:

Each game is played with the same pieces, differing only in the moves. We watch them advancing through the intricacies of the plot, as we trace the course of an x or a y through the combinations of an algebraic equation, with a similar curiosity to know what becomes of them at the end, and with about as much consciousness of individuality in the ciphers.³

Even within sensation novels individuals were compared to puppets, as Count Fosco's remark illustrates in *The Woman in White*, inevitably bringing forth the artificiality of the characters manipulated by the conventions of the genre: 'What are we (I ask) but puppets in a show-box? Oh, omnipotent Destiny, pull our strings gently! Dance us mercifully off our miserable little stage!'⁴. The echoes with Collins's text are certainly not coincidental ('Were they, like him, merely the puppets of a monstrous show?'), but Wilde's later hints at the world of the theatre brings even further the narrative's undermining of the artificiality of the characters and/or of individual identity:

His reason revolted against it, and yet he felt that some tragedy was hanging over him, and that he had been suddenly called upon to bear an intolerable burden. Actors are so fortunate. They can choose whether they will appear in tragedy or in comedy, whether they will suffer or make merry, laugh or shed tears. But in real life it is different. Most men and women are forced to perform parts for which they have no qualifications. Our Guildensterns play Hamlet for us, and our Hamlets have to jest like Prince Hal. The world is a stage, but the play is badly cast.

Thus, Wilde's short story recurrently recalls how the sensation novel was linked with mechanical reproduction, and how the sensational formula owed its popularity to predictable plots and depthless characters. Sensational narratives hinged upon series of secrets gradually unveiled by amateur detectives or professional policemen, the succession of sensational revelations ensuring the readers' entertainment. Yet, 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime' overturns the clichés of the genre. As suggested, the narrative alludes to the most famous sensation novels, from Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* to Collins's *The Woman in White* or *Armada*. The short story opens with Lady Windermere, a rewriting of Braddon's eponymous heroine. As a prototypical sensation novel, *Lady Audley's*

Secret was deemed to have inverted Wilkie Collins's plot of wrongful incarceration and exchange of identity in *The Woman in White*. Unlike Collins's narrative of female victimization and male mercenary power, Braddon's novel explores the construction of the female self in order to reveal its artificiality: the narrative takes the reader through layers of secrets, proposing new secrets each time one is disclosed. In so doing, Braddon turns Gothic motifs and plot patterns into the means of investigating femininity: the innocent fair-haired and blue-eyed eponymous heroine is, in fact, a bigamist who attempts to kill her first husband, as well as an arsonist who sets fire to the inn in which her enemy is sleeping, and eventually a madwoman driven by passionate and uncontrollable instincts. As opposed to earlier Radcliffean heroines, therefore, the female protagonist is neither raped nor murdered, exchanged, locked up or buried alive. On the contrary, the female self, which is so much subjected to male power and violence in eighteenth-century Gothic novels, is here independent and autonomous. Lady Audley plays upon the clichés of ideal femininity, is capable of self-erasure and well-versed in self-reproduction, fashioning a beautiful and seamless image which rarely betrays her criminal nature.

The influence of Braddon's novel sieves through the text as soon as Wilde painstakingly intersperses hints at the clichés of feminine beauty sensation novelists capitalized on. Lady Windermere's 'grand ivory throat', 'large blue forget-me-not eyes' and 'heavy coils of golden hair' of 'such gold as is woven into sunbeams or hidden in strange amber' recalls Braddon's prototypical eponymous heroine whose 'fair face [shines] like a sunbeam', whose eyes are 'as blue and as clear as the skies on a bright summer's day', her hair falling 'about her face like the pale golden halo you see around the head of a Madonna in an Italian picture'.⁵ However, though Lady Audley is undefinable and oscillates between the angel and the *femme fatale*, as insinuated by her pre-Raphaelite portrait, or between the Madonna and the Mary Magdalene,⁶ Lady Windermere's face, which has 'something of the frame of a saint, with not a little of the fascination of a sinner', is but a red-herring: there are no mysteries about Lady Windermere's sexual life; the female character who has married three times has 'never changed her lover'.

Revealingly, as Wilde makes sensation trivial, his laying bare of codes which were already criticized for their artificiality in the 1860s reverberates with Victorian concerns about the construction of identity and the way in which representation changed with the rise of a material culture thriving on images and advertisements. When Lord Arthur Savile wanders through the city, his obsessional fear that the advertisements offering rewards for information likely to lead to the arrest of murderers may reveal his own guilt points to the textualization of identity which sensation novels recurrently highlighted. Indeed, sensation novels foregrounded identity as built upon visual signs which could be bought and might therefore be deceptive: in Dickens's *Bleak House*, for instance, links are drawn between characters and texts or images, and Lady Dedlock's body is often evaluated through comparisons with pictures and photographs, climaxing with the reward-bill for the murder which Inspector Bucket pins in her own house. Likewise, Wilde's allusions to prototypical sensational characters suggests from the very beginning that individual identity is but a set of signs to be read and exhibited. In addition, the cheiromantist who, through palm reading, unveils the secrets of the past and those of the future, brings further the new conceptions of a reality dominated by representation: the parascience of cheiromancy reads hands like so many texts, bringing the legibility of the body to parodying excess.

In addition, through its parody of fatality, Wilde's story also makes explicit how much the sensation novel owed to scientific progress and the development of new sciences (and pseudo-sciences) which redefined the nature of man. As Lawrence Frank has shown, the detection story 'appeared at a moment of social and intellectual crisis that it both recognized and defined.'⁷ Indeed, the vision of man was increasingly naturalistic; the more and more secular and positivist science challenged earlier worldviews, climaxing with Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859)—a publication which revealingly coincided with the first instalments of Collins's *The Woman in White*. As a result, the figure of the Scotland Yard detective, able to create 'a chronological, an associative, and, implicitly, a causal sequence of ideas based on the assumption that law governs not only all natural phenomena, but also the workings of the human mind,'⁸ was endowed with new preternatural powers: the detective's ability to reconstruct thoughts and deeds and his expertise in forensic analysis constructed him as the epitome of nineteenth-century new sciences, a figure which constantly recalled the implications of a universe denied divinity or design.

This is undoubtedly the reason why Wilde hinges the plot upon a palm reader's prophecy that Lord Arthur will commit murder. Fearing the crime will taint his betrothed, Lord Arthur wishes to postpone his marriage until the murder he is doomed to commit is over. In other words, the narrative reworks the stereotype of the born-criminal with which sensation novels frequently engaged. As a matter of fact, sensation novels recurrently brought to light the period's concern with man's place in nature and with the nature of man as particularly revealed through the development of mental physiology, which redefined human subjectivity by researching volition and consciousness. As psychophysiological theories developed, they intimated that man was little more than an automaton, thereby depriving him of his agency. As a consequence, many sensational villains and villainesses are framed by contemporary debates around the notion of the criminal. Sensational as well as late-Victorian revisions of Gothic plots of inherited doom or haunting crimes hence often use the medical field to examine villainy and crime and to study man's moral choice. In the 1880s and 1890s, when criminology's popularity soared, especially after Cesare Lombroso's theories on the born criminal were translated and published in Britain, Victorian psychologists figured that consciousness recorded stored-up ancestral experiences and that volition was thus predetermined by ancestors. Increasingly, in the second half of the nineteenth century, research on the criminal, fuelled by Darwinian theories, reconstructed man's morality and conscience in purely materialistic terms: crime resulted from brain mechanisms which were morbid but could, perhaps, be manipulated to ensure moral reform. The physio-psychological construction of criminality and the physiologists' determinist view of criminality went therefore hand in hand with the idea of an impending fatality which threatened to taint the following generation.⁹

Inevitably, as already argued, contemporary science's almost supernatural power to predict deviant behaviour pinpointed the permeability of the boundary between science and supernaturalism. Criminologists' prescient foreknowledge of crime constructed the empirical science of criminology as a new religion and brought home the scientist's occult powers: since morality resulted from a training of the will which could then be inherited by the offspring, the criminologist appeared as a god-like figure capable of seeing through individuals and reading their moral feelings. As Kelly Hurley has shown, 'the surprising compatibility of empiricism and supernaturalism'¹⁰ branded many a mid- and late-Victorian Gothic revision. By denying the powers of

criminology and forensic analysis as well as the possibility of reform for his character, Wilde's rewriting of the criminologist's power through cheiromancy hence humourously highlights prototypical concerns of the sensation novel. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, as well as in *The Woman in White* or *Armada*, the characters are not only haunted by their crimes, but the detectives are also convinced that destiny will lead them to unmask the criminals. Providence guides Walter Hartright in *The Woman in White* and Robert Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret* along their investigation: Robert Audley 'believe[s] that it is [his] destiny to'¹¹ unveil his aunt's criminal identity. Significantly, destiny is troped through a 'hand which is beckoning [the detective] further and further upon the dark road whose end [he] dare[s] not dream of.'¹² Similarly, Walter Hartright, first thrilled by the woman in white's 'hand pointing to the dark cloud over London,'¹³ then follows the hand of fate to rescue his love:

From thousands on thousands of miles away—through forest and wilderness, where companions stronger than I had fallen by my side, through peril of death thrice renewed, and thrice escaped, the Hand that leads men on the dark road to the future had led me to meet that time.¹⁴

As another instance, Collins's *Armada* explores more thoroughly individuals' possibilities to be 'the masters of [their] own destinies.'¹⁵ The novel revolves around the idea that the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the sons, dooming Ozias Midwinter to murder Allan Armada. Once again, the hand of a young maid involved in the forging of registers on which the plot hinges allegorizes fatality throughout the narrative: '[a]void the maid whose wicked hand smoothed the way to the marriage.'¹⁶ In Wilde's short story, on the other hand, palm-reading derides Gothic fatality, rewriting the sensational characters' lack of agency. The comparison of men to pawns is reminiscent of Mansel's review of sensation novels and his criticism of the characters' want of individuality:

How mad and monstrous it all seemed! Could it be that written on his hand, in characters that he could not read himself, but that another could decipher, was some fearful secret of sin, some blood-red sign of crime? Was there no escape possible? Were we no better than chessmen, moved by an unseen power, vessels the potter fashions at his fancy, for honour or for shame?

Moreover, sensation fiction's play upon the female body is reworked throughout the short story as the cheiromantist reads Lady Windermere's hand once a month, examining the size of her thumb or the shape of her little finger to reveal her character and foretell her future. As already argued, Lady Windermere's lack of mystery is ironically set in contrast with sensational female characters whose body parts are constantly analysed and evaluated by professionals and scientists. Like other later sensation novels, *Lady Audley's Secret* is punctuated by the reading of the heroine's/villainess's body parts, most particularly her hand. Indeed, Braddon subverts the Victorian tools of heroine description not only by turning them into so many slippery tropes, but also by criminalizing the hand of the heroine: it is Lady Audley's 'hand', that is, her handwriting, which incriminates the heroine. The detective believes that Lady Audley's 'hand' will grant him access to her identity: 'I should know what she was like by this slip of paper [...] the feathery, gold-shot, flaxen curls, the pencilled eyebrows, the tiny straight nose, the winning childish smile, all to be guessed in these few graceful up-strokes and down-strokes'.¹⁷ The solving of the enigma depends therefore upon deciphering the textualisation of the heroine's/villainess's body. As a result, the way in which a body part synecdochically replaces the female character and betrays her guilt encapsulates the novel's subversion of the literary codes defining the domestic

ideal, since Lady Audley's proper femininity is merely displayed through a series of Victorian clichés. As Lady Audley appears to be a character made more of words than of flesh, her dazzling stereotyped body—with her face shining 'like a sunbeam', her 'rosy lips', her 'delicate nose' (52)—present a view of the protagonist as a highly literary representation of ideal womanhood. Simultaneously absent and present, the fraudulent female character recedes into an overproduction of visual signs aimed at captivating the beholder and foregrounding femininity as chimerical image. As the novel unfolds, furthermore, these signs function as symptoms which demand professional interpretation. This is why the investigation focuses precisely on the woman's body: Lady Audley is continuously symbolically dismembered, her body parts examined, from her hand to a lock of hair which betrays one of her crimes, climaxing with the final medical survey aimed to justify the character's confinement into a mental home.

So, if Braddon turns Gothic motifs and plot patterns into the means of investigating femininity, Wilde's emphasis on lack of secrecy is underlined by his play upon the hands of his characters which can be read literally. This is the reason why Wilde's focus on Lord Arthur's hand on which 'He thought he could detect the stain of blood already upon them' rewrites Braddon's murderess completely. As Lord Arthur compares himself to Lucretia Borgia or looks at the obituary column in the *Times*, the connections with Braddon's novel (whose heroine is also seen as a Victorian Lucretia Borgia¹⁸ and who fakes her death by publishing news of her death in the *Times*) becomes increasingly obvious. However, ironically, cheiromancy replaces detective analysis, as the seer reads the body and reveals its secrets—albeit without the authority of forensic science. There is eventually no professional to penetrate the mysteries of the character's physiology, nor is there either anything romantic about the cheiromantist—a midst between 'a family doctor and a country attorney', who derides the portraits of the middle-class professionals and amateur detectives of sensation novels.

Thus, Wilde's short story humourously plays upon the codes of a genre which was criticized for its artifice. As he turns the secular and physiological secrets of sensation novels into decrees of providence, Wilde reveals the excesses of a genre which used scientific progress as a means of reading human nature. Ironically re-instilling the supernatural in a materialistic world, Wilde does not aim to denounce the desacralization of the modern world, however. Even if science seems to have robbed man of his conscience, he closes his narrative on his guilty hero living happily ever after, his foul crime unpunished...

¹ E. S. Dallas, 'Lady Audley's Secret', *The Times* (18 November 1862), 8.

² For a definition of the sensation novel, see Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 37 (1982), 1–28; Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), and *The Sensation Novel: from The Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994).

³ Henry Mansel, 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review* 113 (1863), 481–514, 486–7.

⁴ Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* [1859] (Dover: Alan Sutton, 1992), 558.

⁵ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1861–62] 1987), 5, 261.

⁶ 'Yes; the painter must have been a pre-Raphaelite. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face so as to give a lurid lightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister look to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait' (Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 70); 'The interior of this luxurious bed-chamber might have made a striking picture for an artist's pencil ... Lucy Audley, with her disordered hair in a pale haze of yellow gold about her thoughtful face, the flowing lines of the soft muslin dressing-gown falling in straight folds to her feet, and clasped at the waist by a narrow circlet of agate links, might have served as a model for a mediæval saint, in one of the tiny chapels hidden away in the nooks and corners of a grey old cathedral, unchanged by Reformation or Cromwell ...' (Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 215–16).

⁷ Lawrence Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, [2003] 2009), 30.

⁸ Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence*, 32.

⁹ Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic* (Cardiff: Wales University Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1996] 2004), 5.

¹¹ Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 200.

¹² Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 172.

¹³ Wilkie, *The Woman in White*, 14.

¹⁴ Collins, *The Woman in White*, 383.

¹⁵ Wilkie Collins, *Armada* [1864] (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), 48.

¹⁶ Collins, *Armada*, 104.

¹⁷ Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 64.

¹⁸ 'What pleasure could have remained for Lucretia Borgia and Catherine de' Medici, when the dreadful boundary line between innocence and guilt was passed, and the lost creatures stood upon the lonely outer side?'; Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, 296.